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ABSTRACT

This discussion of nongovernmental public- and private-sector fee-based information services in the changing library, social, and technological environment includes descriptions of the relationships between libraries and commercial firms, types of fee-based information services, and the services provided by commercial information vendors. Brief histories of corporate and free-lance information services are also presented, with emphasis on the kinds of services made available by the individual free-lance information broker and the large-scale information firm. Concluding the report is a consideration of future trends and issues which will affect fee-based information services of all types. The changing role of information in society, the growth of the information industry, and increasing competition for a share of the information market are among the topics addressed. A 52-item reference list and a 26-item supplemental bibliography accompany the text. (Author/JL)

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NO MORE FREE LUNCH: COMMERCIAL FEE-BASED INFORMATION SERVICES---PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

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Introduction

In 1981 the North Suburban Library System in Wheeling, Illinois, contracted with a company called Information on Demand to provide answers to two hundred reference questions at a cost of $6000. Believed to be the first agreement between a public library system and a commercial information "broker," this event highlights the growth of private sector fee-based information services in the U.S. over the past decade and a half.(1) The contract also serves as a microcosm of the past and present relationships between public and private sectors of the information economy and future trends in that area.

Institutions such as public, academic and special libraries are themselves no longer strangers to fee-based services. During the past decade interlibrary loan charges, bibliographic database search fees and photocopying charges have become facts of life in the library community. Some services are subsidized entirely by the institution, thus hiding the "fee." Other services may require direct payment of some or all of the charges by the patron/user.

The relationship between libraries and commercial firms is a long and deep one. Libraries are dependent on the private sector for everything from desks and shelving to indexes and abstracts.(2) Yet developments in the information economy in recent years have fundamentally changed that relationship while at the same time exacerbating the "fee vs. free" conflict already in progress. The commercial sector is no longer functioning merely in support of libraries by the creation of information; more and more services outside of libraries are engaged in the delivery of information as well. Many of those services are companies and individuals seeking a profit.

Three broad types of fee-based organizations are engaged in varying degrees of packaging and distributing information products to meet the specific needs of subscribers/customers. Each of these types has the primary purpose of tailoring and marketing information created by other parties.

Non-profit bibliographic utilities such as OCLC, WLN, UTLAS, and RLIN provide their member libraries with such services as catalog cards and electronic mail to support interlibrary loan, in addition to various types of detailed bibliographic information. Analogous to these operations are private corporations such as Lockheed, SDC and BRS that offer extensive on-line bibliographic searching and document delivery services. Such bibliographic utilities provide access to citation databases that are searchable in a variety of ways as well as a limited number of other services. The amount of packaging done for clients by these utilities is minimal.

A second type of fee-based service has appeared in recent years that might be termed an "information utility" and crosses the line from bibliographic to information retrieval. Companies such as Compuserve and The Source offer on-line access to numerous full-text services, including restaurant listings, horoscopes, stock quotations, electronic shopping, encyclopedias, magazines and games. Recent advertisements for Compuserve and The Source give subscriber figures at 25,000 and 11,000 respectively. (3) Mead Data's LEXIS makes the texts of federal court decisions available to its subscribers. Other emerging video- and teletext services also fit this type of utility. (4)

The third element of this information fabric is the information service, often called an information broker. These services are present in varying degrees in both public and private sectors and are characterized by extensive digesting and packaging of information to meet specific needs of their clients. For purposes of this paper, "public sector" is taken to mean not only federal, state and local governments, but also any organization that exists or operates through public largesse such as funding sources or tax-exempt status. "Private sector" is meant to include for-profit companies that deliver information products and services in ways often associated with libraries and in other, expanded methods that libraries have been unable or unwilling to provide.

Private sector information services have been made possible by a shift during the past two decades in the relationship between information and the economy. "...(T)he production and processing of information, which were essentially peripheral, not-for-profit activities, have become primary, for-profit activities. This has brought library functions nearer to the mainstream of economic activity...today information is increasingly defined as a commodity to be bought and sold."(5) This conflict has been described as a part of a "Value Triad of Information in Society," with competition and conflict among the commercial, private and public values of information.(6)

Brokerage services provided by the private sector are only a portion of the information industry. A recent monograph has identified nine elements of that industry:

1. Producers of primary information
   (books, journals, etc.)
2. Producers of secondary information
   (indexes, abstracts, etc.)
3. Communications companies
   (broadcast, cable, etc.)
4. Information distributors, agents, brokers
5. Information transactors
   (banks, investment houses, etc.)
6. Consultants or contract suppliers of information
7. Information retailers or outlets
   (on-demand services, search services, etc.)
8. Equipment or supplies companies
   (computers, micrographics, etc.)
9. Popular media organizations
   (news, advertising, etc.)

Both public and private fee-based services occupy parts of the above listing, primarily categories four, six and seven.(7) This model allows placement of bibliographic and information utilities and information services into a wider, industry-wide context.

Brokerage services are becoming less limited to private sector sources. NTIS and ERIC have engaged in document delivery and database creation from their collections for the past decade or more. More sophisticated fee-based services now present in the public sector include those based at public libraries, such as Minnesota Public's INFORM(8); non-profit research institutes such as the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education's Research Information Services for Education(9,10); and academic Libraries like Lehigh University's.(11) These services are often being sold to private sector organizations.

Past and Present

That commercial information-related services as a whole have developed into a full-blown trend is evident from a number of indicators. In 1967 the Information Industry Association, a trade group, was formed; by 1980 it numbered more than 150 corporate members.(12) The goal of IIA is "to promote the development of private enterprise in the field of information and to gain recognition for information as a commerical product."(13) Fee-based services are a growing part of that industry. The Bowker company now publishes an annual Information Industry Marketplace, and both a directory and journal of fee-based information services are available.(14,15,16) A book-length overview of the fee-based sub-field and at least two manuals of the how-to-start-your-own variety have also appeared in the past two years.(17,18,19)

The history of private sector fee-based information services dates back to 1948, the founding year of the French firm SVP (S'il Vous Plait).(20) This Paris-based company has prospered over the past three decades, and currently has affiliate companies ---including FIND, one of the largest private information service firms in the United States---in some nineteen countries.(21)

The earliest American business in this area seems to be the Research Information Service, begun in Chicago in January 1947 by John Crerar. A start-up fund of $60,000 was created by local business and industry; initially the service was free. However, in September 1948, RIS began charging fees and continues to do so.(22)

Since the late 1940s a number of other fee-based information companies have developed in the United States. World Wide Information Services began in New York City in 1958. In early 1979 one author estimated that seventy-five such firms were in operation.(23) A fall 1979 survey of the field revealed that six such firms of one hundred and five responding were established during the 1960s; thirty-six companies began operations in the 1970s. The survey indicated that private information companies can be divided into three categories: large (more than twenty-five full time employees), medium(between five and twenty-five staff members) and small(fewer than five full-time staff). These firms have names like FIND, Facs, Information on Demand, Informatron, Infocorp, Info-Search, The Information Store and so on. The bases of operation for most of these companies tend to be in California, New York and Washington, D.C.(24)

Free-lance information brokers did not appear in significant numbers in the U.S. until the late 1960s and early 1970s. One impetus for this development seems to have been the "revolting librarians" movement which took shape on the West Coast during that time.(25,26) Another factor may have been the "floating librarian" concept that appeared in the library literature over the same period.(27,28,29,30).Thus members of the profession were both encouraged to operate outside of a physical building, and some librarians actually did so. The free-lance movement gained more momentum as a result of two conferences on the subject held at Syracuse University in 1976 and 1977.(31,32) Yet the Maranjian/

Boss survey indicates that relatively few information service free-lancers are working in the U.S.; responses were received from only thirty-two people operating in twenty-two states. California(with nine) and New York(with six) again led the list.(33)

The relative lack of free-lancers currently working as information brokers may be a temporary phenomenon. One observer has has noted, "There is a dynamic future for librarians who want to work out of their homes. When you get to be large, you get an overhead that forces you to charge $50-$75 per hour. I don't think clients are willing to accept the high fees charged by large information brokerage firms, which are asked out of necessity to cover a large overhead. People who work out of their homes can work for a lot less and work a lot better. When you're small you control the quality of the work you offer because you do the work yourself."(34) As librarians in large academic libraries might also testify, size can work against service in the delivery of information.

Considering the entire spectrum of private information services, an enormous variety of individual services are offered. (35) Both companies and free-lancers sell everything from computer software design to current awareness, on-line searching and records management. Traditional "library" services are available as well as broader functions related to the "information professional" concept.(36)

However, individual fee-based information firms tend to offer specific services directed at a limited range of clientele. (37) Even though the company has billings of more than three million

dollars per year, FIND addresses its services primarily to customers in the business world. Those services include quick and customized research, selective dissimination of information and document delivery. Both deposit and retainer accounts are available. About fifty employees process more than three thousand inquiries per month.

A second large firm, Washington Researchers, employs a staff of twenty people to tap the information available in Washington, D.C. Life FIND, Washington Researchers issues a variety of publications as spin-offs of its service capabilities. Clients are primarily marketing, research and development and coporate planning personnel.

A medium-sized company, Information on Demand, has been described as "the largest full-service document delivery company in the United States, with annual sales of more than $750,000." (38) IOD is one of at least ten fee-based information services that supply documents to users of Lockheed's on-line database service, DIALOG.(39) In 1980 Information on Demand was receiving more than eight thousand document requests per month; most of those requests were in scientific and technical areas.

The clientele of these three companies---business firms, market researchers, lawyers, etc.---seems to hold for other fee-based information services, whether large, medium, small or free-lance. The Maranjian/Boss survey seems to support what common sense would dictate---the people willing to pay for information are those people in competitive situations who need information fast.

The success of fee-based companies apparently revolves around four factors: introduction of retainers to insure repeat business; vigorous marketing to increase volume; development of products that can be sold more than once; and orientation of services to specific types of clientele.(40)

Future Trends and Issues

The future of the three basic types of fee-based services (bibliographic and information utilities and information services) can be put in perspective by looking at information use as having evolved through a trio of different eras.(41) Era One was characterized by discipline-oriented research and such institutions as the library and the "invisible college." Era Two, beginning after the Second World War, was noted for mission-oriented research and an explosion of indexing and abstracting services. Era Three began in the late 1960s and emphasized problem-oriented research in response to such broad issues as environment and energy. Information brokers, which can cut across disciplines to fine specific needed information, are primarily a third era phenomenon.

Like all models, this one of information eras is a simplified version of reality; but it does allow a coherent approach to the historical and future development of information institutions and services. The future of commercial fee-based services is tied to the interaction of institutions from all three eras with the added spice of current and emerging technologies.

As a recent author has noted, the distinction between "public" amd "private" sectors of the information economy is becoming less meaningful.(42) Commercial firms are selling their services to libraries; libraries are initiating services patterened after some offered by the commercial sector. "Even the government increasingly relies on the market model to define its own informational activities. For the National Technical Information Service ...cost recovery has been a major principle of operation..."(43) A recent task force recommended that "The Federal government should set pricing policies for distributing information products and services that reflect the true cost of access and/or reproduction..."(44)

This increasing disintegration of boundaries is a result of "proprietary interest in information as a profitable resource as opposed to the diminishing concern for the social interest in information as a shared resource."(45) Eugene Garfield has made an observation that seems to run counter to most thinking about information, but is important if information is to be considered a "profitable resource." "...(W)e can observe one peculiar characteristic about the information we generate; it is very perishable... The perishable nature of information makes it possible for you to just keep on producing it."(46)

In one sense information is permanent; a book or an on-line database can be used many times with little or no degradation of content. However, in annother sense---currency---information can be very perishable. Especially in scientific, technical, business and medical fields, up-to-date information is the most important

kind. As long as new information is generated, much existing information will indeed be "perishable" to some extent. Thus, commercial, fee-based information services will always have a commodity to market.

However, the market context is bound to change and perhaps drastically. One source notes that, "The future additions of consulting, continuing education, or a number of other services is quite certain for it is only in this way that the fee-based information services can have predictable, steady sources of income."(47) As personal computers, videotext and other interactive systems proliferate, more and more people and businesses will be able to execute their own quick searches in on-line databases. Document delivery, indexing and bibliographies are some current broker services that may also be affected by the spread of electronic technology.

Yet the growth of information is unlikely to lessen; thus a market will continue to exist ---and probably expand---for brokers who can access information needs and problems and develop ways of meeting and solving them. Information brokerage may develop more in the direction of generalist services and away from the detailed work that clients, with a minimum of equipment and training, can perform themselves.

Fee-based services, both public and private, are currently lacking in visibility as a distinct sector of the information industry. What is needed is an umbrella that will effectively

unite organizations as diverse---and as concerned with autonomy and self-preservation---as OCLC, ERS, The Source, ISI and FINB/SVP. A major barrier to such a union is linguistic; a plethora of terms is used to describe the services of such organization: database vendors, on-demand or fee-based information services, and information brokers, specialists, retailers, consultants and professionals. This babel of terminology is not conducive to a linkage of organizations that sell similar services.

The identity problems might be further alleviated if fee-based organizations formed a trade association of their own, perhaps under the auspices of the Information Industry Association. Such a group could approach common problems like standards of service, ethics, conflict of interest, ownership of information and so forth. If this association included both public and private sector services, a common platform for expression might diffuse conflicts emerging between libraries and commercial firms.

Two schools of thought seem to exist concerning that conflict. One author notes, "Brokers maintain that they are not selling the material in the library, they are only selling access to that material. They sell the delivery of the desired information to their clients."(48) A practicing broker has made a similar claim: "Only the service to get the information to the user are chargeable. We do not own any information."(49)

This broker point of view is not shared by many librarians. "The problem of how to provide the best products and services at the lowest cost constitutes the major tension between librarians

and the information industry as a whole. Librarians have traditionally been committed to providing information whether the patron can pay or not...The commitment of the information industry is to develop products and services which will produce an economic return...Librarians have charged that the information industry does not take enough interest in developing some mechanism for the transfer of resources to insure that those needing information but unable to pay for it will nevertheless receive it." (50) The last situation can especially be seen in services like on-line database searching.

Although admittedly a prejudiced observer, broker Barbara Felicetti has discussed four misconceptions about fee-based services that falsely heighten the conflict between libraries and commercial services. Those misconceptions are 1) "Information is free;" 2) "Information brokers serve to many specialized clients;" 3) "Public Libraries should be providing the same service as brokers, for free. Why is there a need for an industry that is, after all, profit-making when a library system is already in place which is tax supported and which offers services for free?" and 4) "The information broker is going to replace the public library and the public librarian. Brokers and libraries are natural enemies."(51) Felicetti notes that information is expensive to create, organize, store and access; that brokers are generalists, not specialists; that libraries operate under constraints that preclude many broker-type services; and that brokers supplement rather than supplant libraries and librarians.

This benign world view is useful in providing some balance to the "free vs. fee" debate. However, such a view seems almost quaint when confronted with the profit motive. Estabrook has observed that "the information industry is rapidly moving to take over the library services that may be profitable for them. If these businesses continue to develop as they have...libraries are going to be pushed into a more limited societal role..." Not only will institutions such as libraries be affected, but access to information will become more constricted.(52)

Somewhere between these devil-or-deep-blue-sea alternatives lies the future as it will actually develop. As information becomes more and more profitable, the scramble for those profits will increase. A need will always exist for brokerage-type organizations that can provide quick or specialized or in-depth in-depth information services unavailable at the library.

However, libraries can blunt the undercutting of their operations by commercial firms in a variety of ways. All libraries, whether special, public or academic, serve particular clientele. Agressive market surveys to identify those clienteles, followed by agressive delivery of services to them, will keep the libraries open by making them indispensible to the people they serve.

The debate between libraries and the commercial firms is beginning to heat up. The future promises nothing less than exciting ferment, whatever its final shape.

Footnotes

1. Barbara Newlin, "The 200 Questions." Library Journal, 1982; 107:151.

2. For an excellent discussion of traditional commercial services to libraries, see Carlos A. Cuadra, "The Role of the Private Sector in the Development of Library and Information Services." Library Quarterly, 1980; 50:94-111.

3. For a semi-current list of services offered by The Source (the number changes almost daily) see Source Digest, 1981 Nov; 1(1). See also Stan Miatkowski, "Compuserve: A Potpurri of Information Services." Popular Computing, 1982; 1(5):138-40 and CompuServe Information Service Today, 1982, April;16-7.

4. David Needle, "Prestel starts operation in the United States: videotext now available for popular micros." InfoWorld, 1982; 4(5):1,6. See also InfoWorld, 1982; 4(6): 1,5 and 8-9.

5. Anita Schiller, "Shifting Boundaries in Information." Library Journal, 1981; 106:706.

6. U.S. Congress, Office of Technological Assessment, Computer-Based National Information Systems: Technology and Public Policy Issues (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1981), 15.

7. Ibid., 163-4.

8. Zella J. Shannon, "Public Library Service to the Corporate Community." Special Libraries, 1974; 65:12-16.

9. Lorig Maranjian and Richard W. Boss, Fee-Based Information Services: A Study of a Growing Industry (New York: Bowker, 1980): 86-9.

10. Matthew Hogan, Information Brokers/Free-Lance Librarians: An Alternative Reference Service (Washington, D.C.: ERIC, 1979. ED 195 241), 4-5.

11. Susan A. Cady and Berry G. Richards, "The one-thousand-dollar alternative: How one university structures a fee-based information service for local industry." American Libraries, 1982; 14:175-6.

12. Maranjian and Boss, Fee-Based Information Services, 8.

13. Schiller, "Shifting Boundaries in Information," 706.

14. Information Industry Marketplace 1982 (New York: Bowker, 1981).

15. Journal of Fee-Based Information Services (published by Information Alternative, Box 657, Woodstock, NY 12498), 1979--to date.

16. Kelly Warnken, Directory of Fee-Based Information Services 1980-81 (Woodstock, NY: Information Alternative, 1981).

17. Maranjian and Boss, Fee-Based Information Services.

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19. Martin S. White, Profit from Information---How to Manage an Information Consultancy (New York: Andre Deutsch, 1981).

20. Ty Webb, "The Information Broker: Librarian Without a Library." Show-Me Libraries, 1980; 31(8):5.

21. Maranjian and Boss, Fee-Based Information Services, 67.

22. Hogan, Information Brokers/Free-Lance Librarians, 4-5.

23. Richard W. Boss, "The Library as an Information Broker." College and Research Libraries, 1979; 40:137.

24. Maranjian and Boss, Fee-Based Information Services, 6.

25. Ibid,, 93.

26. Celeste West and Elizabeth Katz, Revolting Librarians (San Francisco: Booklegger Press, 1972).

27. Mary Gaver, "The Librarian in the Academic Community---A New Breed." Wilson Library Bulletin, 1969; 43:540-44.

28. Mary Lee Bundy and James Welbourne, "The Floating Librarian" (paper presented at the Congress for Change, University of Maryland, June 1969).

29. Patrick Penland, et al, Floating Librarians in the Community (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh, 1970. Proceedings, Institute on the Floating Librarian in the Emerging Community).

30. Robert P. Haro, "The Floating Academic Librarian." American Libraries, 1971; 2:1169-73.

31. Barbara B. Minor, ed., Information Broker/Free Lance Librarian--New Careers--New Library Services (Washington, DC: ERIC, 1978, ED 145 863).

32. Barbara B. Minor, ed., Alternative Careers in Information/Library Services: Summary of Proceedings of a Workshop. (Washington, DC: ERIC, 1978. ED 148 362).

33. Maranjian and Boss, Fee-Based Information Services, 4.

34. Matthew Lesko, Washington Researchers, quoted in Warnken, The Information Brokers, 125-6.

35. Warnken, The Information Brokers 59-75, contains an annotated listing of such services.

36. See Anthony Debons, et al, The Information Professional: Survey of An Emerging Field (New York: Dekker, 1981), 165-228. Chapter 8, "Occupational Titles of Information Professionals" can be read as a detailed listing of potential fee-based information services.

37. The following profiles are based on Maranjian and Boss, Fee-Based Information Services, 67-102.

38. Ibid., 80.

39. Ibid., 132.

40. Ibid., 133.

41. This discussion is based on Boss, "The Library as Information Broker," 136-7. Boss' "information eras" concept is derived from a National Science Foundation study performed by Arthur D. Little, Inc., and published in a shortened form as Into the Information Age: A Perspective for Federal Action on Information (Chicago: American Library Association, 1979).

42. Schiller, "Shifting Boundaries in Information," 706-7.

43. Ibid.

44. U.S. National Commission on Libraries and Information Service, Public Sector/Private Sector Interaction in Providing Information Services (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1982), 51.

45. Schiller, "Shifting Boundaries in Information," 707.

46. Eugene Garfield, "The Future of the Information Industry." Current Contents, 1978 Jan 30; 6(5):11.

47. Maranjian and Boss, Fee-Based Information Services, 133-4.

48. Robin D. Crickman, "The Emerging Information Professional." Library Trends, 1979; 28:323.

49. Annette Hirsch, quoted in "Information Brokers: Who, What, Why, How." Bulletin of the American Society for Information Science, 1976; 2(7):17.

50. Crickman, "The Emerging Information Professional," 317.

51. Barbara Whyte Felicetti, "Information for Fee and Information for Free: The Information Brokers and the Public Librarian." Public Library Quarterly, 1979; 1:16-19.

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